Conference in Commemoration of Amilcar Cabral,
Cape Verdean Progressive Club, East Providence, RI, July 6, 2002

Amilcar Cabral in Colonial Guinea-Bissau: Context, Challenges and Conquests

Peter Karibe Mendy
Rhode Island College

1. Introduction

In celebrating the triumphs and legacies of the immortal Amilcar Cabral, it is also important to appreciate the specific context and challenges which he encountered and had to deal with, the environment in which he made his significant contribution to the liberation of the African continent from European colonial domination.

Colonial Guinea-Bissau, or *Guiné Portuguesa* ('Portuguese' Guinea) as designated by the Portuguese, was not only the country of birth of Amilcar Cabral but also the milieu within which he made history. Amilcar Cabral is among the foremost revolutionaries of the twentieth century. He also had a well-established track record as an intellectual, a professional agronomist, and a revolutionary theoretician.

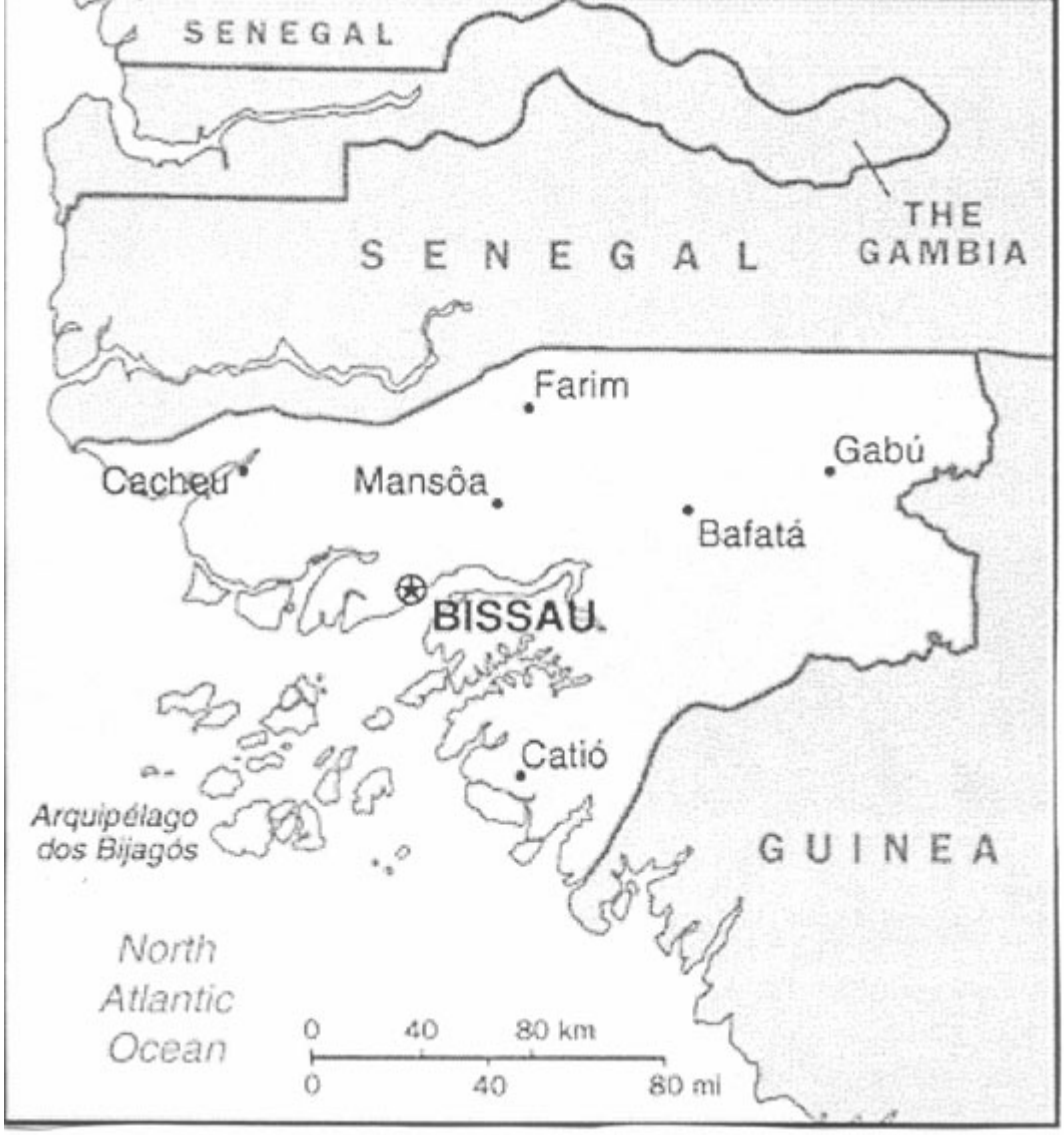
Cabral ka muri, Cabral is not dead, is a popular saying in Guinea-Bissau, to invoke the spirit of struggle and sacrifice he resurrected. Although the tragic drama still unfolding in Guinea-Bissau may seem an affront to the memory of Cabral and his comrades, who paid the ultimate prize for the struggle to liberate Guineans and Cape Verdeans from brutal Portuguese colonial domination, Cabral remains a source of inspiration for the progressive forces of meaningful change in not only Guinea-Bissau, but also in the rest of Africa.

This celebration of Cabral will focus on an examination and appreciation of the colonial situation in Guinea-Bissau that moved Cabral and his like-minded comrades to embark on the high-risk and life-threatening road of armed struggle for the liberation of Guineans and Cape Verdeans.

2. Historical Perspective

The country today Guinea-Bissau, wedged between Senegal and Guinea-Conakry, in West Africa, was an integral part of the seven hundred year-old Mandinka Kingdom of Kaabu[1], which started as a vassal state of the famous Mali Empire founded by the legendary Mandinka warrior king Sundiata Keita, in the thirteenth century.

[1] For more information on the kingdom of Kaabu, see, *inter alia,* Mamadu Mané, 'Contribution à l'histoire de Kaabu des origins au XIXème siècle', *Bulletin del'IFAN*, Série B, No.1, Dakar, 1987, pp. 88-159; George E. Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630,* Westview Press, Boulder, 1993; and Carlos Lopes, *Kaabunké. Espaço, território e poder na Guiné-Bissau, Gâmbia e Casamance pré-colonais*, Comisão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses, Lisboa, 1999.



With its capital at Kansala, in the interior of present-day Guinea-Bissau, Kaabu in time became an empire in its own right, with political influence that extended north and east to the Casamance region of Senegal, and further north to The Gambia; the influence also extended south to parts of modern Guinea-Conakry. Kaabu disintegrated during the second half of the nineteenth century, as a result of domestic political crisis and growing external pressure from aspiring European colonial powers - the French in the Casamance region of Senegal and in Guinea-Conakry, the British in the Gambia and the Portuguese in Guinea-Bissau.

Thus, there are strong historical and cultural links between the peoples of Guinea-Bissau, Guinea-Conakry, the Casamance region of Senegal, and The Gambia. This important fact of historical and cultural unity among the various peoples of these neighboring countries was not lost to Amilcar Cabral, and would become useful for political mobilization for independence and for pan-African solidarity to execute the armed liberation struggle.

The first Europeans to reach the shores of Guinea-Bissau were the Portuguese. In 1446, the Portuguese navigator, Alvaro Fernandes, dropped anchor at Varela Point, on the extreme northwest coast of Guinea-Bissau. Following the 'discovery' and the immediate settlement of the Cape Verde islands by the mid-1460s, the Portuguese Crown claimed exclusive rights over 'the lands of discoveries' in West Africa stretching from Senegal to Sierra Leone. To advertise such claims to Portugal's European rivals, Portuguese monarchs began, as early as 1486, to assume the grandiose title of *Senhor da Guiné* (Lord of Guinea).

However, for centuries, such claim remained essentially meaningless. In Guinea-Bissau, Portuguese influence was limited to a few fortified trading centers, principally Cacheu and Bissau. This 'sphere of influence' was largely secured by the efforts of Cape Verdeans, initially the category known as *lançados* (because they 'launched' themselves onto the West African mainland in defiance of Portugal's trade ban and threats of punishment by death), who founded one of the

earliest 'Portuguese' settlements in the region - the settlement of Cacheu, in the territory of the Manjacos, in 1588[2]. Yet, in spite of the constructions of forts in Cacheu and Bissau, Portuguese and other European traders in the interior paid *daxas* (a corruption of the Portuguese word *taxas*, meaning taxes) to a number of local rulers - until the military conquest of the mainland in 1915.

Nevertheless, over the long centuries, a steady flow of Cape Verdean merchants, slave traders, soldiers of fortune, administrators, priests, and teachers, descended on the territory and interacted with its various inhabitants at various levels.

It was as a teacher, that Juvenal António Lopes da Costa Cabral, the father of Amilcar Cabral, found himself in Guinea in 1911. And it was as an independent businesswoman that Iva Pinhel Evora, the mother of Amilcar Cabral, also found herself in the territory around the same time.

The mainland of Guinea-Bissau was finally conquered in 1915, just nine years before Amilcar Cabral was born in the town of Bafata, about 95 miles east of Bissau, today the capital of the country. It was a series of brutal 'pacification' campaigns that ended with the capture of the Pepel ruler of Bissau, who, under interrogation, apparently told the *Conquistador*, Captain João Teixeira Pinto, that he would "…never submit, because he hated whites", and that "…if he should die, and there in the other world he should meet whites, he would wage war on them"[3]. Contemptuous of such defiant attitude, Teixeira Pinto promptly condemned him to death. According to the account of a contemporary Cape Verdean lawyer and critic of the 'pacification' campaigns in the territory, Loff de Vasconcellos, the defiant Bissau King was "tied up, mutilated, his eyes plucked out, and buried alive", while one of his wives, who was heavily pregnant, "was shot in the belly"[4]. On the adjacent Bijagos archipelago, the violent 'pacification' campaigns would terminate only in 1936 - four years after Cabral left the territory for his ancestral country of Cape Verde.

Thus, the Guinea-Bissau into which Amilcar Cabral was born, on September 12, 1924, was a country partly painfully recovering from, and partly painfully still undergoing, the horrors of a savage war of conquest. The long tradition of resistance to the centuries-old Portuguese colonial posture in Guinea-Bissau was, by Cabral's own admission, a source of inspiration for the armed liberation struggle.

3. Nature of Portuguese Colonial Domination

With the military conquest of Guinea-Bissau, the Portuguese hastened to extend colonial administration to all parts of the territory.

In 1918, an office of *Negócios Indigenas* (Native Affairs) was hastily set up in Bolama, then the capital of the colony, to administer the provisions of the new *politica indígena* (native policy), which the first Director, José de Oliveira Ferreira Diniz, said was to be "tutelary and benevolent"[5]; a 'native policy' of collaboration "since what the European lacks - physical resistance- is almost uniquely what the native can dispose"; it was to be "a policy of association, of the intelligence of the European who thinks and the hand of the native that executes"[6].

In an effort to address the acute shortage of educated manpower, due to the scarcity of schools and the great reluctance which metropolitan Portuguese manifested with regards to working or settling in the colony, the colonial authorities turned to Cape Verde, which was seen to possess "…a social

[2] André Álvares de Almada, *Tratado Breve dos Rios de Guiné do Cabo Verde (1594*), editorial LIAM, Lisbon, 1964, p.76.
[3] Ibid., p. 202.
[4] L. Loff de Vasconcellos, *A defeza das Victimas da Guerra de bissau: O Extermínio da Guiné*, Imprensa Libanio da Silva, Lisboa, 1916, p. 36.
[5] José de Oliveira Ferreira Diniz, 'A Politica Indígena na Guiné Portuguesa', in *Congresso do V Centenário do Descobrimento da Guiné,* Vol. I, Lisboa, 1946, p.4.
[6] *Ibid*., p.4.

stratum of the most cultured", from which "…Guiné can expect a valuable increase for a better social condition of her natives, whom civilization has hardly reached yet"[7].

By 1925, Cape Verdeans already made up 27 percent of the *administradores* and 61 per cent of the *chefes de posto*, the colonial functionaries responsible for implementing Portugal's colonial policies[8]. According to António Carreira, who was a long-serving Cape Verdean *administrador* in the colony, up until the launching of the liberation war in 1963, no less than 75 per cent of the colonial officials in the territory were Cape Verdeans[9].

In most immediate contact with the colonized, the *administradores* and their subordinates, the *chefes de posto*, exercised enormous powers, against which the 'natives' had no appeal. In their areas of jurisdiction, mainly in the countryside where the overwhelming majority of the 'natives' lived, they were responsible for, *inter alia*, the maintenance of 'public order and tranquillity'; collection of the much-hated colonial taxes; forced recruitment of free labor for the building and maintenance of roads, bridges, government offices and residences, schools and hospitals. To ensure compliance and absolute deference, defiant 'natives' were summarily punished, with the *palmatoria* as the preferred 'rod of correction'. At their disposal was a ruthless para-military force known as *cipais*, who would arrest and mete out the punishments, and generally terrorized the rural population.

With the preponderance of Cape Verdeans in the colonial administration of Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verdeans came to be generally viewed with hostility and distrust, in much the same way as they were generally viewed in Angola and Mozambique, where they were less prominent in the colonial service but nevertheless occupied, as *civilizados*, relatively privileged positions in colonial society. That Cape Verde was a colony and Cape Verdeans a colonized people with a history punctuated with brutal exploitation and oppression, as well as callous abandonment to the mercies of drought and famines, was most likely unknown.

Nevertheless, hostility to, and suspicion of, Cape Verdeans, would be a formidable challenge to Amilcar Cabral and his political agenda of national liberation for the peoples of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde.

It should be pointed out that the systematic use of coercion and violence to control the 'restless natives' was not a peculiar characteristic of Portuguese colonialism, but indeed a common feature of all the colonial regimes in Africa. Justifying the use of force in the colonial context, Joseph Chamberlain, the British Colonial Secretary, remarked in 1895: "You cannot have omelettes without breaking eggs"[10]. The French Governor of the Ivory Coast, Louis-Gabriel Angoulvant, put it more bluntly in 1908: "That some natives should be killed …is inevitable, and even desirable"[11].

The brutal nature of Portuguese colonial rule in Guinea-Bissau, as well as in Cape Verde, revolted Amilcar Cabral and made him more determined to struggle for the destruction of colonialism:

> I saw folk die of hunger in Cape Verde and I saw folk die from flogging in Guinea (with beatings, kicks, forced labor), you understand? That is the entire reason for my revolt[12].

The Guinea-Bissau into which Amilcar Cabral was born was also a divided country, of *civilizados* ('civilized') and *não civilizados* ('uncivilized'), of *assimilados* (the assimilated)) and *indigenas* (natives) or *gentios* (heathens); a color-conscious compartmentalized world of *brancos* (whites), *mestiços* (mixed-race), and *pretos* (blacks). In the 1950s, so-called 'civilized' population numbered some 8, 320 individuals[13] - a mere 1.6% of the total population. They were racially identified as *brancos*, 27%; *mestiços* (the overwhelming majority of whom were Cape Verdeans), 55%; and

---

[7] Governador Luis António de Carvalho Viegas, Vol. II, *op.cit.* p. v
[8] Peter Karibe Mendy, *Colonialismo Português em Africa: A Tradição de Resistência na Guiné-Bissau, 1879-1959*, Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa/Imprensa Nacional-Casa Moeda, Bissau/Lisboa, 1994, p.311.
[9] Peter Karibe Mendy, op.cit. p. 307
[10] Cited in Michael Crowder, *West Africa Under Colonial Rule,* Hutchinson & Co., London, 1968, p. 128.
[11] Cited in *ibid.*, p. 110
[12] Amilcar Cabral, *Unity and Struggle,* Heinemann, London, 1980, p. 41
[13] Peter Karibe Mendy, *op.cit*., p. 311

pretos, 18%. With the stroke of a pen, the Lisbon authorities decreed 'uncivilized', the indigenous populations of Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique, but not Cape Verde.

As *não civilizados*, the *indigenas* had to pass a 'civilization' test in order to be considered 'civilized' and be assimilated into the lusophone world glorified by the sixteenth century Portuguese poet Luis de Camões. The 'test' emphasized the ability to read, write and speak Portuguese 'correctly'; to be engaged in wage employment; to have 'good behavior' and to abandon 'tribal usages and customs'. Ironically, the very important criterion of literacy and fluency in Portuguese clearly disqualified a significant number of the Portuguese themselves - some 70% of Portugal's population in 1920, and 67% of her citizens in 1930[14].

Fundamentally, being 'civilized' meant the internalization of most of the racist assumptions of the Portuguese. In the main, the *civilizados* remained spiritually and psychologically amputated from Africa, such that special efforts had to be made to 're-Africanize' themselves.

4. Constraints and Challenges

Amilcar Cabral returned to Guinea-Bissau in September 1952, to take up an appointment as research agronomist at the Pessubé agricultural experimental station in Bissau. It was a country he barely knew, having left at age nine, and having stayed nineteen years outside. His motive for returning was more than the need for gainful employment, as his first wife, Maria Helena Rodrigues, told Patrick Chabal (Cabral's political biographer):

> He wanted to go to Africa with a clear political purpose in mind. He wanted to go to Guinea eventually but it was luck that he was able to go right away. You can be absolutely certain that his life's ambition was to go to Guinea and engage in political work. That was the only thing he talked about … He would always say that he had to go back 'home' and fight there. He used to say that he had to learn about his country and that it was only there that he would be able to fulfill himself[15].

In Guinea-Bissau, in spite of being a highly educated *civilizado*, with knowledge of Portuguese literature and culture superior to that of any metropolitan Portuguese in the colony, with valuable research and practical field experiences, Cabral found himself in the colonial service as an *engenheiro agrónomo de segunda classe* (second-class engineer agronomist).

The race factor was only one of many colonial realities Cabral had to confront; some of the harsh realities included the widespread use of violence by colonial officials against defenseless people. In May 1953, for example, during a visit to a remote outpost on the island of Orango Grande, in the Bijagos archipelago, Cabral witnessed the brutal whipping of an elderly woman by a Portuguese *chefe de posto*, provoking him to angrily order the official to stop. The bewildered and irritated *chefe de posto*, ignoring the fact that Cabral was his superior, responded: "What is this? What right do you have to give me orders? … Do you mean to say that I cannot punish these lazybones?"[16]

Indeed, Cabral encountered a colony inundated with repressive laws decreed by the fascist *Estado Novo* (New State) government of António Oliveira de Salazar, the rigidly conservative and racist university professor of economics recruited by the soldiers who abruptly ended Portugal's sixteen years of democratic experiment, with the *coup d'état* of June 17, 1926. The laws aimed at silencing all dissent, and curbing political activity. Already in 1931, a strict censorship of the colonial press in 'Portuguese' Guinea was imposed, followed two months later by an ominous warning from the first *Estado Novo* Governor, João José Soares Zilhão, that every one in the colony was expected to

[14] J.T.M. Machado, *No II Centenário da Instrução Primário*, Ministerio da Educação Nacional, Lisboa, 1972. According to Machado, the illiteracy rate during the period 1900-1960 was: 78.6% in 1900; 70.8% in 1920; 67.8% in 1930; 59.3% in 1940; and 40.3% in 1960.

[15] Cited in Patrick Chabal, *Amilcar Cabral: Revolutionary leadership and people's war*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK), 1983, p. 46

[16] Cited in Oleg. Ignátiev, *Amilcar Cabral,* Edições Progresso, Moscow, 1984, p. 73

"honour the *Mãe Pátria* [Mother Country] by submission to her designs, by respect for her institutions, by love for her venerable traditions"[17].

A year after the military take-over in Portugal, the new Lisbon authorities created the *Policia Internacional para a Defeza do Estado* (International Police for the Defence of the State), PIDE; a ruthless secret Police dedicated to silencing critics and opponents of the fascist regime, and especially Africans demanding fundamental human and political rights in the colonies, through imprisonment, torture, and political assassination. Present in Guinea-Bissau by the mid-1950s, Amilcar Cabral would become one of its victim.

Cabral's major job assignment as an agronomist was to conduct an agricultural census, the first and most exhaustive of its kind in the territory. It was just what Cabral wanted, for it meant extensive travel and the opportunity to learn at first hand the realities of Portuguese colonial rule as experienced by the overwhelming majority of the people, knowledge of which was vital for a successful mobilization for independence.

Starting in September 1953, Cabral spent seven months traveling across the length and breath of 'Portuguese' Guinea, gathering not only relevant information about land usage, crop cultivation, and, *inter alia*, soil conditions, but also, unofficially, the acquisition of strategic knowledge from the villagers about the level of discontent with the colonial situation, and the likely responses to an anti-colonial mobilization drive for independence.

The constraints to a successful agricultural census were formidable. The harsh colonial context was such that the so-called 'natives' were naturally inclined to be suspicious and uncollaborative with colonial officials. They had learnt that questions about land use, lifestyles, livelihoods, and livestock, could have serious implications for them and their communities; and so, they consistently deployed various evasive strategies and tactics, such as lying, deceiving and concealing, as much as possible, everything from the colonial officials. A frustrated Director of Natives Affairs, acknowledging the widespread resistance of the people to information gathering for official uses, had earlier noted: "The native avoids, as much as possible, the census operations … he knows at once that they bring at least greater control on behalf of the authorities, of which he defends against, making use of that well-known passive resistance of his".[18]

Thus, Amilcar Cabral, in the service of the Portuguese colonial state, found himself the subject of suspicion, and was therefore challenged to overcome the almost automatic distrust the people in the countryside had of colonial functionaries.

On the other hand, Cabral's other political objective of gauging urban discontent with Portuguese colonial rule, with a view to mobilizing for the independence struggle, was also fraught with difficulties. After all, it was in the urban centres that the presence of the ever-vigilant colonial state was felt strongest. Such that when, in 1954, Cabral organized a sports and recreational club in Bissau, with a hidden agenda to raise political consciousness, he soon found himself forced to leave the colony and return to Portugal. Infiltrated, the political dimension of the club quickly became known to the Portuguese colonial authorities, which promptly closed it, for apparently being open to not just the *assimilados* but also to the *gentios*[19]. Cabral was apparently banned from taking up permanent residence in Guinea, and only allowed to visit his mother and family once a year[20].

Nevertheless, Cabral would return even more determined to implement his political agenda. It was during one of those permitted visits to the territory that he co-founded the *Partido Africano de Independencia* (African Party of Independence), PAI, on September 19, 1956. Four years later, to emphasize the indispensable linkage with the independence of Guinea, PAI became PAIGC, the *Partido Africano de Independencia da Guiné e Cabo Verde* (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde).

---

[17] Cited in Peter Karibe Mendy, *op.cit*, p. 342.
[18] José de Oliveira Ferreira Diniz, *op.cit*. p.5
[19] Patrick Chabal, *op. cit.,* p. 49.
[20] Mustafah Dhada, *Warriors at Work: How Guinea Was Really Set Free*, University Press of Colorado, Niwot (Colorado), 1993, p. 146

But the challenges to implementing the PAIGC's short-term objective of 'immediate and total independence' for especially Guinea-Bissau remained daunting. As Cabral learned from his analysis of the social structure of the territory, there were contradictions and antagonisms between and within the various social classes and groups, which left them having different attitudes and positions towards the independence agenda.

Cabral identified the major contradiction in Guinea-Bissau as that between the colonized and the colonizer, between those who demanded the freedom, independence and sovereignty of the people, the nationalists, and those who denied such demands, the colonialists. The 'secondary contradictions' were the ethnic divisions and antagonisms, the much-talked about 'tribalism', which he believed could be effectively addressed with appropriate education. In the rural areas, he distinguished between the traditional ruling classes that collaborated closely with the colonial authorities, and the masses of peasants who benefitted the least from the implantation of the colonial system.

Cabral also found himself having to address the issue of Cape Verdean identity in the colonial context. In 1961, in what appears to be an open letter to Cape Verdeans resident in Senegal (where the PAIGC also mobilized for the liberation efforts in Guinea as well as in Cape Verde), entitled "Why Cape Verdeans are Africans", Cabral pointed out:

> Some, forgetting or ignoring how the people of Cape Verde were formed, think that Cape Verde is not Africa because it has many mestiços. These do not know, for example, that in South Africa, there are many more mestiços than in Cape Verde and that Angola and Mozambique together have as many mestiços as Cape Verde - and these countries do not stop, for these reasons, to be African. It should be pointed out that even if in Cape Verde there was a majority white native population, as found in the countries of North Africa (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, etc), Cape Verdeans would not stop being Africans[21].

Thus, the colossal challenge which Cabral and his comrades faced was how to convince the most exploited and oppressed people of the need to fight to destroy the very structure responsible for their exploitation and oppression. Convincing the exploited masses and winning their sympathies was one thing, getting their active participation in the struggle was quite another. The fundamental challenge, therefore, was to make revolt meaningful to the lives of all those who revolted.

This demanded effective, inspirational and visionary leadership; it required a charismatic leader with both physical and moral courage, courage of conviction, and the commitment to pay the ultimate price for a just cause. It was such leadership that Cabral was able to provide.

As was the case in almost every country in Africa, the struggle for independence in Guinea-Bissau also started in the urban centers, in the form of peaceful demonstrations and strikes, " … to demand that the Portuguese change their position with regard to the legitimate rights of our people to self-determination and national independence"[22]. But the colonial authorities remained violently intransigent.

On August 3, 1959, the disgruntled Bissau dockworkers and merchant sailors who went on strike for more mundane demands for salary increases and better working conditions were literally shot back to work, leaving some fifty strikers dead and a lot more injured. The Pidjiguiti Massacre, of which there was an incredible official silence, became a vital turning point as the PAIGC took the critical decision to change course and embark on the road of national liberation "through struggle by all possible means, including war"[23] Cabral himself was quick to acknowledge that the strategy of the movement was, until then, "a mistaken one"[24].

---

[21] Reproduced document in Fundaçâo Mario Soares, *Amilcar Cabral: Sou um Simples Africano*, Fundaçâo Mario Soares, Lisboa, 2000, p. 31

[22] Amilcar Cabral, *op.cit*., p. 108.

[23] Cited in Basil Davidson, *The Liberation of Guiné*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth (UK), 1969, p.32

[24] Amilcar Cabral, *op.cit.*, p. 31

And the most important lesson drawn from the brutal Portuguese response to the Pidjiguiti strike became the imperative to mobilize and organize the rural masses for national liberation.

That it was enormously successful is borne out by the final outcome of the armed liberation struggle.

5. Accomplishments and Acclaims

Moving the headquarters of the PAIGC to safe territory south of the border, in Conakry, capital of recently-independent Republic of Guinea (also known as Guinea-Conakry), the legendary *Abel Djassi* (Cabral pseudonym) and his comrades got busy carefully preparing and planning for the now inevitable war of independence. Four years later, on January 23, 1963, the Portuguese in Guinea felt the resolve of the fighters of the PAIGC, brave fighters mobilized and inspired by Amilcar Cabral.

The attack on the Portuguese garrison at Tite, in the south of Guinea-Bissau, initiated the protracted armed liberation struggle which was, without doubt, the 'finest hour' in the history of the colonized peoples of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. It was a war in which Guineans and Cape Verdeans, in spite of the colonially-generated antagonisms and, in the context of an armed liberation struggle, colonially-promoted hostility between them, fought and died bravely, side by side, against an enemy armed to the teeth with the latest conventional weapons, and stubbornly determined to defend the colonial status quo.

Amilcar Cabral was undoubtedly the key central figure, the undisputed leader, of the political, military and diplomatic battles that had to be won to guarantee victory for the armed struggle. His genius was precisely the ability to convince the doubtful and the suspicious, to mobilize the sympathizers to take life-threatening risks, to persuade skeptical international opinion of the righteousness of the cause, to secure vital material resources without compromises, and especially, to galvanize men and women into incredible acts of bravery.

With characteristic modesty, Cabral would have dismissed any attribution of credit to him for the successful outcome of the liberation struggle with his familiar affirmation: "I am a simple African doing my duty in my country, in the context of our time".

The question of 'the leader' was one that Cabral avoided, putting emphasis instead on 'collective leadership'. Nonetheless, he was very aware of its importance. One of the rare occasions when he made reference to 'the leader' was in an address to the first Tri-continental Conference of African, Asian and Latin-American political activists and revolutionaries, held in Havana, Cuba, in January 1966. Stressing that a fundamental requirement of a revolution was the development of revolutionary consciousness, he pointed out that such consciousness, in turn, "necessarily calls attention to the capacity of the leader of the national liberation struggle to remain faithful to the principles and to the fundamental cause of this struggle"[25].

In other words, a revolution succeeds or fails depending on the quality of leadership. Basil Davidson, the renown English historian who knew Cabral intimately, having traveled extensively in the liberated areas of Guinea-Bissau during the war, has observed that a liberation movement succeeds by developing an 'ideology of liberation', which must be in harmony with a people's consciousness in any given time and place[26].

The ideology of liberation developed by Cabral and his comrades was a simple and straightforward one, without the big words and complex concepts, geographically specific and historically pertinent, with the only *ism* being the one attached to the adjective *national*. When pinned down, as inevitably happened in the context of the ideological Cold War, to state the ideological foundation of his movement, Cabral was unambiguous:

---

[25] *Ibid*., p. 90

[26] Basil Davidson, *The People's Cause: A History of Guerrillas in Africa*, Longman Group Ltd, Harlow (UK), 1981, p. 115.

> Our ideology is nationalism, to get our independence, absolutely, and to do all we can with our own forces, but to cooperate with all other peoples in order to realize the development of our country[27].

A critical and independent thinker, Cabral avoided the other *isms* brandished by African leaders of independent and yet to be liberated countries; fashionable *isms* which supposedly revealed the radical and/or revolutionary postures of the leaders. Cabral's reticent was undoubtedly due to recognition of the fact that a movement, a party, or a country is or is not 'socialist', 'Marxist', or 'communist', not because of the postures and postulations of its leadership or government, but because of the social structure which characterize the particular society, and the nature of the interplay between the social classes.

Although Cabral was very influenced by Marxism, and socialist ideals pervaded much of his policy statements, he was anything but dogmatic or orthodox. Cabral was ever careful not to be 'more Marxist than Marx, more Leninist than Lenin', who both lived in different times and different contexts.

Realism and pragmatism were the other two *isms* that guided his actions as he struggled tirelessly to not only understand the reality of Guinea but as he put it, to "transform it towards progress and justice. In the pursuit of such objective, he underscored the importance of being honest and transparent with the people, and strongly urged his comrades to: "Hide nothing from the masses of our people. Tell no lies. Expose lies wherever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories"[28].

Herein lies the 'secret', if a secret it is, behind Amilcar Cabral's outstanding accomplishments. They were accomplishments grounded in the realities of Guinea and Cape Verde, in concrete knowledge acquired from 'the school of the people', in the modesty and humility to listen and to learn from the so-called 'ignorant peasants'.

Cabral had profound respect for African culture and traditions, for the wisdom that comes with age and the lessons of the experiences of the elders: "The elders are our museums, our libraries, our history books - the present and the past"[29]. But his respect was not one of blind reverence.

Cabral's leadership was instrumental in the transformation of ethnic affinities and social class solidarities into a multi-ethnic national consciousness of a people's common predicament and cause. Cabral clearly identified with the 'Portuguese' Guinea of the *mato* (bush), unlike the other nationalists who distanced themselves from things rural. The famous *sumbia* (bonnet) that became a trademark of his militancy symbolized this profound identification. As the Guinean sociologist, Carlos Lopes, has correctly observed:

> The national liberation movement achieved an outstanding mixing of inter-ethnic groups. During the armed struggle the different ethnic groups shared a common cause. They interacted. They believed in the same watchwords. They discovered collective purposes[30]

Decisive also was the remarkable unity between Guineans and Cape Verdeans, for which Cabral was largely responsible. Despite the efforts of the Portuguese and the PAIGC's nationalist rivals in both Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, narrow-minded nationalists who, from different perspectives, were vehemently opposed to the idea of unification between the two countries, Guineans and Cape Verdeans together struggled, died and triumphed in the forests of Guinea-Bissau.

Cabral had a rare clarity of mind that enabled him to see through the confusion and mystification of race and color, of class and ethnicity, of the culturally arrogant and racist 'civilizing mission' and the

---

[27] Cited in Carlos Lopes, *From Liberation Struggle to Independent Statehood*, Zed Books, London and Westview Press, Boulder/Zed Books, London, 1987, p. 57.
[28] Amilcar Cabral, *Revolution in Guinea*, p.72
[29] Amilcar Cabral, in Forward of Basil Davidson, *The Liberation of Guiné*, p.12
op. cit., p. 12
[30] Carlos Lopes, *op. cit.*, p. 43

policy of assimilation - the subtle justifications and the clever 'divide and rule' tactics used by Portuguese colonialism to camouflage colonial objectives and realities.

At a more fundamental level, the remarkable accomplishments of Cabral can be attributed to his insistence on the primacy of the political over the military dimension of the national liberation strategy; a strategy that aimed at winning the political soul, the hearts and minds, of the colonized. For this reason he urged his comrades to never forget "… the fact that we are *armed militants* and *not militarists*"[31].

6. Conclusion

Amilcar Cabral was instrumental in the liberation movement that brought independence to the peoples of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. The effectiveness of his leadership is evident in the fact that, in spite of his cowardly assassination, on January 20, 1973, the already triumphant liberation movement did not fall apart, as calculated by the planners of the heinous act.

Instead, Cabral's death would only intensify the liberation struggle, which would culminate not only in the proclamation of the new nation-state of Guinea-Bissau, on September 24, 1973 (eight months and four days after Cabral's death), but also contribute significantly to the downfall of the forty-eight-year-old fascist *Estado Novo* (and thus the liberation of the Portuguese people), on April 25, 1974. It would achieve its objective of independence for the people of Cape Verde, on July 5, 1975. In effect, the PAIGC victory would hasten the dismantlement of Portugal's colonial empire in Africa.

Guinea-Bissau, therefore, was not only the birthplace of Cabral, but the fertile ground for the germination of his ideas, for the testing of theories and the development, through concrete practice, of appropriate theses of the nature of society and politics in a geographically-defined and historically-specific context; the battleground for the bloody national liberation struggle viewed by Cabral as expression of "the inalienable right of every people to have their own history"[32].

As we celebrate the independence of Cape Verde, it is timely to pay tribute to the Cape Verdean heroes and heroines who heeded the call of Cabral and risked life and limb in the forests of Guinea-Bissau for a just cause; living legends like the first President of independent Cape Verde, Aristides Pereira, another co-founder of the PAIGC and Cabral's right-hand man; and the current President of Cape Verde, Pedro Pires, who deserted from the Portuguese Air Force, to distinguish himself as field commander in the *mato* of Guinea-Bissau.

This is enduring testimony to the quality and capacity of Cabral's leadership.

[31] Amilcar Cabral, *op.cit*, p. 70
[32] Amilcar Cabral, *Return to the Source*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1973, p. 50

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BROOKS, G. *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630,* Westview Press, Boulder, 1993.

CABRAL, A. *Revolution in Guinea: An African People's Struggle*, Stage One, London, 1969.

Return to the Source, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1973.

Unity and Struggle, Heinemann, London, 1980.

CHABAL, P. *Amilcar Cabral: Revolutionary leadership and people's war*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK), 1983.

CROWDER, M. *West Africa Under Colonial Rule,* Hutchinson, London, 1968

DAVIDSON, B. *The Liberation of Guiné*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth (UK), 1969

The People's Cause: A History of Guerrillas in Africa, Longman Harlow (UK), 1981

DHADA, M. *Warriors at Work: How Guinea Was Really Set Free*, University Press of Colorado, Niwot (Colorado), 1993,

FERREIRA DINIZ, J. O. 'A Politica Indígena na Guiné Portuguesa', in *Congresso do V* Centenário do Descobrimento da Guiné, Vol. I, Lisboa, 1946.

FUNDACAO MARIO SOARES *Amilcar Cabral: Sou um Simples Africano*, Fundaçâo Mario Soares, Lisboa, 2000.

IGNATIEV, O. *Amilcar Cabral,* Edições Progresso, Moscow, 1984,

LOBBAN R. & MENDY, P.K. *Historical Dictionary of the Republic of Guinea-Bissau*, Third Edition, The Scarecrow Press, Lanham, MD. & London, 1994

LOPES, C. *From Liberation Struggle to Independent Statehood*, Zed Books, London and Westview Press, Boulder/Zed Books, London, 1987.

Kaabunké. Espaço, território e poder na Guiné-Bissau, Gâmbia e Casamance pré-colonais, Comisão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses, Lisboa, 1999.

MACHADO, J.T.M. *No II Centenário da Instrução Primário*, Ministerio da Educação Nacional, Lisboa, 1972

MANÉ, M. 'Contribution à l'histoire de Kaabu des origins au XIXème siècle', *Bulletin del'IFAN*, Série B, No.1, Dakar, 1987, pp. 88-159;

MENDY, P.K. *Colonialismo Português em Africa: A Tradição de Resistência na Guiné-Bissau, 1879-1959*, Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa/Imprensa Nacional-Casa Moeda, Bissau/Lisboa, 1994.